The Flat World and the Flat-Worlders

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McDonald's is the epitome of globalization. More than 40,000 franchises around the world serve the same hamburgers and French fries to Spaniards, Congolese, and Malaysians. The "golden arches" are a powerful symbol of a common culture, based on U.S. eating habits, that has transformed global tastes. Americans can find familiar food in practically every city in the world, and today the citizens of nearly every country can participate in an identical eating experience.

McDonald's is an example of the "flat world" that journalist Thomas Friedman described in his 2005 bestseller.[1] The fast-food corporation took advantage of new rules around trade and investment to establish itself around the world, create a global supply chain that ensured a cookie-cutter product across national boundaries, and flood countries with advertising to secure market dominance.

But it turns out that the world is not uniformly flat.

McDonald's is not in every country.[2] Bhutan, for instance, has kept out the franchise in order to prioritize local cuisine. North Korea maintains an ideological resistance to Western fast-food restaurants (though not to fast food itself). Other countries are too poor or too engulfed by war to attract the interest of the megacorporation.

More interestingly, the menu of McDonald's changes according to locale.[3] You can get a porridge at the McDonald's in Malaysia that features chicken strips, fried shallots, and diced chilies. Indian franchises offer a vegetarian Big Mac with two corn-and-cheese patties studded with jalapeno peppers. And the French fries in Canada come in a *poutine* version with cheese curds and gravy.

These variations fall under the rubric of "glocalization," the concessions that globalized products make to local preferences. It's not just McDonald's. You can buy *oden*[4] and other popular Japanese snacks at a 7-11 in Tokyo but not in Pittsburgh. In China, the furniture giant Ikea puts greater emphasis[5] on the outfitting of balconies, which are prevalent in apartment buildings in that country.

Car manufacturers put the steering wheel on one side or the other depending on the country, global computer manufacturers offer keyboards in a variety of alphabets, and global clothing manufacturers have to take into consideration the climate and sartorial tastes of the country where they're selling. The weave of the global economy warps to accommodate stubborn particularities.

The "flat world" that Thomas Friedman depicted in his book needs a cadre of "flat-worlders" to literally level the playing field, not to make it more equal but to render it more accessible to capital. This "Davos man"[6] has no loyalty to a particular state but is instead committed to tearing down all obstacles to the greater mobility of trade and investment. "Davos man" is not likely to eat at McDonald's or buy his furniture from Ikea.

But the question remains: have such titans of globalism created a class of actors who no longer think in nation-state terms as they consciously advance a borderless world? Or does this business elite of bankers, entrepreneurs, and heads of parastatal enterprises retain an essentially national perspective that reflects their particular environment, like *oden* in the 7-11 in Tokyo?

In his new book, *Rooted Globalism*, political economist Kevin Funk seeks to answer this question in the context of a very specific case: the business elites of Arab ancestry in Latin America. This intriguing community, disproportionately represented in their countries' wealthy classes, straddles the regions of residence and origin. Considering the success of the community, this biculturalism seems almost like a superpower.

Many of the most prominent economic actors in Latin America are of Arab descent. The richest man in the region, Carlos Slim of Mexico,[7] was born to Lebanese parents. As much as 10 percent of the business elite in Brazil is of Arab descent. In Venezuela, the former head of the oil ministry who resigned this year amid charges of massive corruption—Tareck El Aissaimi—is of Lebanese and Syrian extraction. Politically, too, this community has excelled. Leaders of Arab descent have presided over Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic. The paternal grandparents of the current president of El Salvador, Nayib Bukele, were Palestinian Christians.

Often facilitated by these success stories, commerce between Latin America and the Middle East has surged over the last few decades. By the end of the 2000s, for instance, trade between South America and the Middle East had tripled since the 1990s. Today, the Arab world has become a larger market than Western Europe for Brazil's agricultural exports. Wealthy elites in the Middle East awash in petrodollars and a well-positioned Latin American business elite that has ancestral roots in the region combine to make a powerful global connection.

This community, in other words, offers an unusual opportunity to answer the question of whether a cosmopolitan business elite views itself more in global terms or according to national reference points. Funk sets out to discover whether this particular set of business professionals is thoroughly globalized, merely "denationalized" in the sense of sweeping aside national loyalties without establishing a global identity, effectively glocalized in their straddling of the national and the international, or exclusively national in their perspective.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the transnational variations in something as simple as a McDonald's menu, Funk discovers in his research that the promoters of globalization take on many of the attributes of the countries where they live. These members of a global economic elite are, in other words, "rooted" even though they may share many of the same preferences (in music, food, movies) and ideological demands (fewer government regulations, lower taxes) with their counterparts in other countries.

As Funk explains "Even if business elites the world over purchase the same newspapers, suits, cars, food, airline tickets, and kinds of music, we cannot necessarily presume that they have become a global capitalist class for itself at a precisely corresponding level." He finds theoretical comradeship with the sociologist Saskia Sassen, who has similarly argued that global identities will necessarily be "dressed in the clothing of the national."

Funk does in-depth interviews with several members of this Middle East-focused elite in Latin America: the founding leader of an Arab-Chilean business group, an Argentinian economist of Lebanese extraction who heads up a business association focused on Lebanon, a senior executive in an organization devoted to Arab-Brazilian trade. The vignettes drawn from these interviews are fascinating. They reveal that, for the most part, this elite doesn't think like "Davos man" in that they are not consciously striving to achieve globalist goals. They retain local tastes, such as their loyalty to national soccer teams. They are going about their jobs in rather traditional ways, like market traders from centuries ago, except that they fly business class rather than sail on merchant ships.

In search of a more globalized perspective, Funk turns to international ad campaigns sponsored by multinational companies like Emirate Airlines, HSBC, and the Brazilian firm Itau. Here, too, there is much rhetoric connected to a flat world of no borders (that allow airline passengers to roam the world), of limitless tomorrows (where everyone is connected to everyone), and unbounded intercultural exchange (regardless of language and other barriers).

But even in these ads, certain markers indicate the extent to which brands remain grounded in locales. A woman skateboarder wears a headscarf; an ad emphasizes the importance of "local knowledge"; a famous Brazilian actress proclaims herself a "global Latin American" who is simultaneously known around the world and rooted in her region (and by extension her country as well).

Funk concludes from these interviews and this survey of advertising campaigns that contrary "to still-prominent discourses of inevitability, teleology, and the 'end of history,' the global capitalist discursive utopia of a fully borderless economy, dominated by a global capitalist class in itself and for itself, has only been partially realized in practice. It is not a fait accompli. Rather, it is an ideological project advanced through corporate advertisements and other means."

Or, as he puts it not once but twice in his book, "Reports of the death of place-based imaginaries thus appear to be greatly exaggerated."

These arguments take place against the backdrop of a three-way struggle among political positions on globalization. Liberals, particularly of the neoliberal variety, have generally supported market-based solutions at the global level and thus have been the closest to achieving the "Davos man" ideal. The left, meanwhile, has challenged globalization as a vehicle of corporate empowerment and the enrichment of the one percent. The right, increasingly, has attacked globalization as well but largely because it has eroded national sovereignty.

All three positions have their nuances. Neoliberals claim to adhere to universal values like the rule of law and human rights that often undercut their commitment to unregulated market activity. The left supports some aspects of globalization, like the free flow of information, culture, and people.

And the populist right, as Funk points out, is not against globalization *per se* but only the conditions under which it flourishes. Populists like Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Donald Trump in the United States critique globalization much as they attack government: as a set of administrative obstacles and threats. They remain wedded to "free markets" but want specific forms of regulation to "encase" the market at a national and global level with only the barest commitment to universal values like human rights. They are globalists, to be sure, and in the case of both Trump and Bolsonaro, have addressed the global powerbrokers at the World Economic Forum in Davos. Although they lambaste "Davos men" as convenient political targets, Trump and Bolsonaro are ultimately glocalists who combine global avarice with local politicking.

Funk's research is intriguing and his writing fluid. But it's hard not to get the feeling that he chose interview subjects that were sure to confirm his thesis. Business leaders who live in their country of birth—or in a couple cases, their adopted country—are certainly more likely to be dressed in the clothing of the nation, however global their affiliations. They are "rooted" because they have not strayed far from their roots, whether adopted or otherwise.

But what if Funk had interviewed an Argentinian of Arab descent working for the IMF in New York? Or a Brazilian of Lebanese extraction working for a multinational corporation in Doha? Or even a Chilean Palestinian heading up the OECD's National Contact Point in Santiago? Perhaps all three would have answered his questions about how they think about their jobs in the same "glocalized" manner as the subjects in his book. But the "Davos man," if he or she truly exists, is more likely to be found in environments that are more denationalized than the ones where Funk went searching for his interviewees.

Or perhaps "Davos man" doesn't exist because Davos does not yet have a set of accompanying political institutions.

The first class of modern globalizers emerged within the context of strong nation-states in the nineteenth century. They were acting on behalf of empires and global powers when they built firms, banks, and insurance companies. A class that is truly denationalized and operating on behalf of global aims would likely accompany the creation of some form of global government devoted to creating a single market, something like the European Union on a global scale. A new consciousness requires new material conditions, and these "globalized" conditions have yet to take root. Funk's search for such a global class today is akin to attempting to find monopoly capitalists in the Renaissance before the rise of modern nation-states.

Still, Funk's conclusions are sound. Political economists should indeed undertake more analyses of corporate executives and those who prowl the centers of global power. Equally important, the left should not retreat into a parochial populism out of disgust with globalization. Rather, the left must seek out a new kind of internationalism that produces not a flat world, but a world of interesting and very particular nooks and crannies that simultaneously strives to adhere to agreed-upon universal values.

As Funk writes in his conclusion, "If the left chooses to fan nationalist flames, it will almost certainly get burned—as well as find itself straying from core principles relating to universal and global emancipation." Like McDonald's and the business elite that Funk interviewed, the left must be global to a degree. Instead of uniform food products or fewer barriers to trade and investment, the left should be fighting for universal principles of equity and democracy. At the same time, however, the left must aim for a rooted cosmopolitanism that pays homage to the particularities of place, whether it's a taste for *oden*, a preference for larger balconies, or the specific political demands of the communities where progressives are organizing.

Notes

1. Thomas Friedman, *The World Is Flat* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2005).

2. WiseVoter.com, "Countries Without McDonald's."

3. Anna Lewis, "McDonald's Menu Items from Around the World That Will Seriously Surprise You,"

Delish, Nov. 23, 2020.

4. 7-Eleven, “How to buy ‘Oden’,” YouTube, Sept. 19, 2019.

5. Katherine Schwab, “How Ikea quietly tweaks its design around the world,” *FastCompany*, Aug. 10, 2018.

6. Shawn Pope and Patricia Bromley, “Who is ‘Davos Man’ today?” LSE Blog, May 14, 2022.

7. Statistica, “The ten richest Latin Americans in 2023, by wealth.”